OPEN AND SHUT?

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Friday, March 04, 2016

Michał Starczewski interviews Richard Poynder for the Otwarta Nauka site

I was asked recently by open science advocate and historian Michał Starczewski if I would do a Q&A on open access for the Otwarta Nauka site based at the University of Warsaw.

Below are the first two questions and answers. **The full interview can be accessed here.**

It is also available in Polish here.

Michał Starczewski: Do you think that openness is already a new standard in the world of scholarly communication, or is it still an ongoing experiment?

***Richard Poynder**:* Well, openness is certainly fast becoming a new standard in scholarly communication. What we don't yet know, however, is exactly what openness means (or should mean) in this context, and exactly what processes and outputs it should apply to (and to what degree). We also don't know who should best fund it, provide it, and manage it.

The OA movement is more than 20 years old. What surprised you most during this period?

What has surprised me most is the OA movement's lack of organisation, or clear strategy on how to make OA a reality. As a consequence, we are now some 15 years away from the Budapest Open Access Initiative (where the term open access was adopted), and much still has to be achieved, not least clarifying the issues listed in my last answer. Apart from anything else, we still have no conclusive definition of open access. Given this, it is no surprise that there is a great deal of confusion about open access.

I think there are two main reasons for the failure of the OA movement to take a more structured approach. First, the research community is not actually very good at organising itself, particularly on a global scale. And it doesn't help that researchers are increasingly incentivised to compete more than co-operate with one another.

Second, OA advocates have tended to approach open access more as if it were a religion than a pragmatic response to the possibilities the network provides to improve both the research process and scholarly communication (which should surely be the ultimate goal of open access).

These two factors have generated unhealthy schisms and disputes within the movement, with advocates spending too much time arguing over doctrine.

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We have also seen OA advocates become addicted to cheerleading and the shouting of slogans, which has deflected them from devoting sufficient time to developing practical strategies and tools to achieve open access. The assumption was that all that was required was to "convert" colleagues. When the movement failed to do that it began lobbying funders and institutions demanding that researchers be compelled to embrace OA, essentially they sought to offload the responsibility onto others.

It also has to be said that the strategies proposed and/or supported by OA advocates have often been cockeyed — not least the concept of the article-processing charge (APC). That anyone ever thought pay-to-publish was a sensible way of disseminating research is most odd. Not only is it impractical, but it has played into the hands of profit-hungry legacy publishers, and indeed any fly-by-night cowboy able to create a web site.

I have also been surprised at how disconnected OA advocates are from the views of the wider research community — a tendency exacerbated by their habit of gathering together in their echo chamber of choice (conference hall, social media etc.) where their beliefs, prejudices and misconceptions are reinforced rather than subjected to a reality check.

The recent Berlin 12 meeting suggests that this ghettoisation is increasing. As the meeting was entirely focused on "flipping" subscription journals to OA models it was "by invitation only" and the organisers chose not to invite any prominent green OA advocates, presumably to avoid any dissenting voices questioning the premise of the plan (although we cannot state this as a fact since the delegate list was secret).

All of which is to say that I have been surprised at how open access has been treated as a "cause" rather than a solution. And despite what OA advocates like to claim, the movement is not by nature democratic, but evangelical.

The French Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal said, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing". OA advocates have sought to persuade colleagues by appealing to their hearts rather than their reason.

While this approach may make sense in the context of deciding whether to believe in God (aka Pascal's Wager), it is not very helpful when trying to persuade people of the need to change the way that research is disseminated.

And it is my belief that this approach has not only slowed progress but is allowing legacy publishers to co-opt the movement for their own ends ...

The full interview (11 questions and answers) can be read on the Otwarta Nauka site here.

It is also available in Polish here.

Posted by Richard Poynder at 12:57

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